

THE COVEY HEADQUARTERS

Volume 13 Issue 2 Summer 2014

This newsletter is aimed at cooperators and sports-people in Missouri to provide information on restoring quail. This is a joint effort of the Missouri Department of Conservation, USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service, and University of Missouri Extension. If you would like to be removed from this mailing list or have suggestions for future articles please contact jeff.powelson@mdc.mo.gov or 816-232-6555 x122 or write to the address shown.



The name of this newsletter is taken from an old concept.....that a quail covey operates from a headquarters (shrubby cover). If the rest of the covey's habitat needs are nearby, a covey should be present. We are encouraging landowners to manage their quail habitat according to this concept. Use **shrubs** as the cornerstone for your quail management efforts. Manage for a **diverse grass, broadleaf weed and legume mixture and provide bare ground** with row crops, food plots or light disking **right next to** the shrubby area.

Small Game in Southeast Missouri

Tim Kavan, Private Land Conservationist, Mississippi, New Madrid, and Pemiscot Counties

Growing up in Eastern Nebraska, most of my hunting background highlighted the ring necked pheasant. It was a fairly simple process back then. When a new snow fell, dad drove around, like a bird dog with his nose to the ground; only dad was using his eyes. He drove around until he discovered a fresh set of tracks in the plum thickets or tall grasses that once dominated the road ditches and waterways throughout Eastern Nebraska. Then he'd tell me and my brothers to follow those tracks and he'd be the blocker on the other side of the section. Sometimes we wouldn't find a bird and sometimes there were so many birds that we couldn't figure out how they didn't make more tracks in the snow.

My story has changed throughout my career. I brought memories of small game and small farming practices with me when I relocated to Missouri to obtain a degree in wildlife conservation. Receiving this degree was going to enable me to land a career where I could continue to work in the field with other professionals to share those dreams and make new ones for the next generation of hunters. But no one could have predicted where that degree was going to send me geographically.

I began working in Southeast Missouri as a Private Land Conservationist in 2007 during a time when conservation was just starting to gain some momentum in the minds of the huge agricultural producers in the area. It was also a time when the bobwhite quail was receiving national recognition for support, restoration, and continued research to determine why the species possesses such a unique set of challenges for recovery when other game species have taken off. It was a time when people spoke of rabbits, quail, or turkey in the past tense. When these animals were seen, it was in specific areas where the remaining habitat could protect a small population during crop harvest, winter storms and hunting pressure.

Today, individual success stories from farmers, wildlife biologists, and upland game hunters are cropping up across Southeast Missouri like weeds. Stories vary from identification of a pheasant, or a covey rise on a freshly planted conservation plot, or perhaps with the creation of new partnerships, positions, or

focus areas. No matter what the topic may center on, the fact is, people are engaging and focusing on small game issues and this is critical in continuing these efforts into the future.

I must share one of my personal success stories with you after mentioning the multitude of success stories rising from the ashes. Living in Southeast Missouri, I quickly adapted to waterfowl hunting because of the sheer numbers of birds in the area and the opportunities that come with the migration. It wasn't until I met up with a few friends through the Bootheel Bobwhites Quail Forever Chapter that I "reengaged" in small game activities.

Michael Riley and Aaron Johnson both have a vested interest in upland bird dogs and over the course of two years we have all become good friends. Michael has three English pointers; Hammer, Kate, and Daisy and Aaron has two English Setters; Sam and Grace. It didn't take long for my childhood memories to rekindle once I stepped out of the truck and they set the dog free in the patch of little bluestem that dominated the area we were hunting. Sure, the methods have changed over the decades, but the air, the point, the smell of gun powder, and the rise of the covey have not. We continued our hunt and amongst all the questions about types of grass and weeds and whether they are good for quail or not, I realized I

needed to connect other biologists with these two guys to listen what they had to say. So we set aside a day in December for a quail hunt. Well, Mother Nature brought one of the biggest snow storms to hit Missouri on the day that everyone was going to travel so we rescheduled our hunt for the last day of the season. There's nothing like showing off your dogs and total numbers of quail like hunting on the last day of the season when the birds have been harassed all year long.



Scott James, Michael Riley, Tim Kavan, Aaron Johnson, and Bill White take time out with the dog's to capture this image of a recent quail hunt in Southeast Missouri

The day finally arrived and we shared memories and success stories, and naturally some friendly criticisms on shooting skills throughout the day. But nothing could have made me realize how lucky I am to have the opportunity to spend time outdoors with friends than when someone was forced to leave the hunt early to rush back to the office to meet a newly established deadline. That's when it hit me; everyone has their own personal measure of success! This man's measure of success, even though he really didn't want to leave, was managing personnel and budgets so that I could efficiently do my job. I measure success differently than Michael and Aaron and so on and so forth. These measures of success are all an integral part of the overall goal and that's been stated several times in this story, to re-engage focus on small game.

Several selected geographies in Southeast Missouri have slowly and quietly become rising examples of how to do things right for small game. The Missouri Department of Conservation has established two Quail Emphasis Areas (QEA's) and four Quail Focus Areas (QFA's) where financial assistance and federal programs have a direct impact on small game populations due to soil types or habitat arrangements. The Quail Forever has also implemented a QF Priority Area nestled inside of a QFA to add

emphasis on how important these geographies are to quail and small game. Social media has also enabled us to share more success stories amongst our friends in one format or another. For example, I have witnessed more images of happy hunters and hunting dogs resting on tailgates full of cottontail rabbits, swamp rabbits, and quail than I have ever dreamed of hearing about in southeast Missouri.

We are lucky to have what we have, but at the same time we must not settle for a compromise. There is always a time and a place for management, for advocacy, and for action. We need to continue engaging more people in this restoration effort by supporting and becoming a member of a non-government organization, teaching our about wildlife, promoting and participating in new programs and never stop learning new and innovative ways to put conservation into action.

The Missouri Department of Conservation's Private Land Conservationists are available to offer technical assistance to landowners and their habitat management issues. Contact your nearest private land conservationist if you have a question about managing or implementing conservation practices on your farm. Visit the MDC website at mdc.mo.gov to locate the nearest private land conservationist near you.

New Small Game Resource for 2014

Small game hunters should look for a new publication as they head afield this fall. The Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) plans to release a new resource, *Small Game Prospects*. This publication will, in part, replace the quail and pheasant reports that have been used in the past. The format for the new publication has not yet been finalized, but staff expect it to included such features as species profiles, research progress reports, regional weather summaries, Conservation Area Manager's Notes, and a Where to Go section. Species to be featured in the report include quail, pheasants, rabbits, squirrels, doves, crows, rails/snipe/woodcock, and bullfrogs/green frogs. *Small Game Prospects* will be published electronically, and a small number of printed copies may be available through MDC public offices. Each featured species or group of species will have its own stand-alone section to allow users to print only the information they are interested in.

Small Game Prospects will include the most up to date regional reports such as weather summaries, biologists' reports, and recent habitat improvements. Look for Small Game Prospects to be available through the MDC website (mdc.mo.gov) this fall.

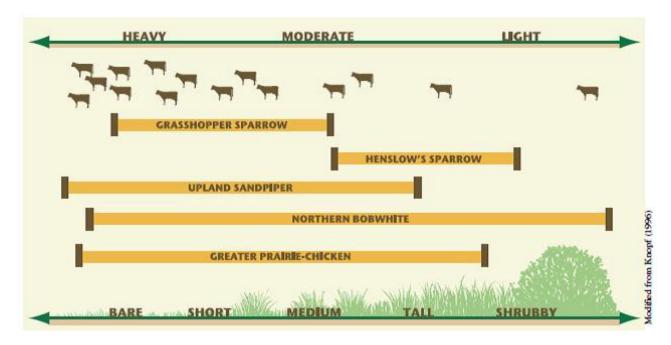
Use GovDelivery to get your copy of The Covey Headquarter Newsletter

The Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) is upgrading their electronic subscription lists to better help you stay informed about conservation news you want. The new service, GovDelivery, will allow you to manage your subscriptions by topics and regional locations. Those of you that currently receive electronic updates from MDC have had your current subscriptions transferred to the new service.

You can review and update your subscriptions at http://mdc.mo.gov/govdelivery. You will need to enter your email address or mobile phone number to change or cancel your subscriptions. For those of you that receive the paper copy of the Covey Headquarters Newsletter and would like to get it electronically, visit the above website and make sure you check the "quail" box. By signing up for this new service, you will receive the quarterly newsletter as well as periodic updates on quail biology and management. Currently over 2,600 people are having their Covey Headquarter Newsletter delivered this way.

Did You Know???

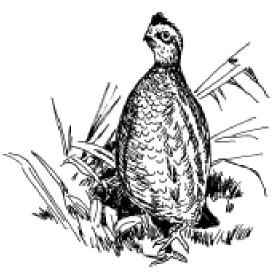
Newly hatched quail chicks are small, about the size of a bumblebee, but they grow very fast. A high-protein diet of insects in the first few weeks of their lives is critical for them to reach their adult weight of 7 ounces.



Quail and other grassland birds require a wide variety of plant heights and densities ranging from bare ground to tall grasses and shrubs as noted in the diagram above. One method used to produce this structural diversity in grasslands is called patch burn grazing. Patch burn grazing mimics the historical interaction of two ecological processes that shaped native prairies – fire and grazing. Each year a third of the pasture is burned. The lush regrowth focuses grazing within the burned area. The burned unit shifts from year to year, providing varied structure throughout the managed area. To learn more about patch burn grazing visit - http://efotg.sc.egov.usda.gov/references/public/MO/Patch_Burn_Grazing_IS_9-04.pdf

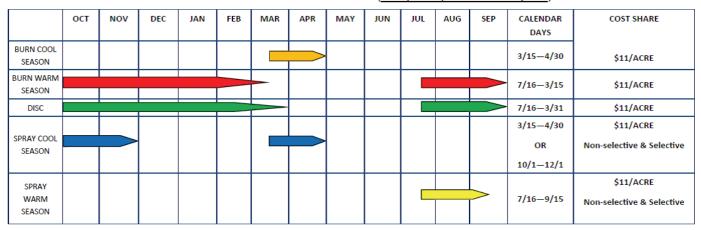
Conduct breeding bird surveys in June

To get an index of quail that survived the winter and are available for breeding, listen for whistling bobwhite males for 1-2 hours after sunrise during June. Nesting by females is normally at its peak this month, so males are actively calling. Establish permanent listening stations throughout your farm. Establish the stations along ridges or in areas where you can hear a good distance. Whistling quail can be heard about 500 yards away, so listening stations should be spaced 1000 yards apart, or be separated by major chunks of woods or hills. Listen at each station for 3 minutes. Count and record the number of individuals you hear in that time span at each station. Be careful not to count the same individuals twice. If you listen every year within the same time frame, you can track how well your birds are surviving winter in relation to your quail management efforts. Along with quail, be sure to listen for Henslow's sparrow, grasshopper sparrow, field sparrow, dickcissel, bobolink, pheasant, and meadowlark as these species respond



positively to quail management. Visit the following website to hear audio call examples of several bird species - www.mbr-pwrc.usgs.gov/bbs/ident.html

CRP MANAGEMENT PRACTICE DATES (complete per contract year)

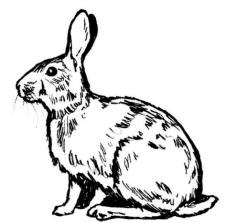


The table above contains CRP mid-contract management options. No management can occur during the primary nesting season (May 1 – July 15), but now is a great time to plan what practices you want to apply to each CRP field. If you are interested in burning, make sure you have a prescribed burn plan in place well in advance of the burn. Consider applying mid-contract management practice early in the timeframe windows. The weather tends to be more favorable during late summer for burning and disking CRP acres. The Missouri Department of Conservation also has a CRP management incentive program that provides cost-share in addition to cost-share provided by the Farm Service Agency. Contact your local office for details.

Short Steps to Quality Rabbit Habitat

Nick Prough, Quail and Upland Wildlife Federation

Cottontail rabbits have always been one of the most popular small game animals in Missouri. Many sportsmen and landowners enjoy seeing rabbits on their land throughout the year. Given the proper habitat conditions, cottontail populations can flourish in a relatively short period of time. Having hundreds of acres of land, or months of prep time to manage for them isn't always a necessity. In fact, much of a cottontail's life is spent on a small area of land, 1 acre or less in most cases. They tend to thrive in a diverse array of early successional habitats that exist in many of Missouri's landscapes such as smaller brushy fields, brushy/shrubby fencerows, and managed native warm season grass fields with thicket borders or brushy edges.



Landowners managing habitat for cottontails should think of two things: cover and food. Managing habitat for food for rabbits is fairly simple. Rabbits in general feed on a wide variety of vegetation, especially younger tender bits of grasses, forbs, wildflowers, seedlings and even your favorite garden plants. For best results, you should have a variety of plants that are available year round in one form or another. Also, food plots should be in close proximity to areas of cover vegetation to provide protection from predators.

I like to spend a crisp early spring day with a chainsaw and working on some simple edge-feathering along the field timbered edges or doing a practice we have termed "Chop and Drop." This technique can be completed in less than 1 or 2 hours' time with a chainsaw and it makes a huge difference in the quantity and quality of available cover around your field edges for rabbits and small game. To do this, find

a suitable location along your timber by picking several less desirable trees on your small field edge and as close to other grassy or brushy areas as possible. Then, either hinge-cut them down ¾ of the way through their diameter to let them fall slowly over to become a "living brush pile" or cut them all the way thru and let them lay where they drop, hence the term "Chop and Drop." Both techniques work well depending on your preference of how you want the final product to look on your land and what types of trees you have to work with.

Adjacent to these edge-feathered or newly created "chop and drop" areas, a small thin strip of early successional grasses/forbs and desirable weeds can be created by light disking in early spring. Disk 12 to 15 ft wide strips to allow for new younger vegetation to come up thru the disturbance you have just created. Alternate your disking with an undisturbed area of existing grasses or habitat that is approximately twice as wide as the disked strip. If you have additional space available in the field, this entire process can be repeated again with an alternating strip disked area, thus creating an additional internal edge for the rabbits to utilize.

To maximize the amount of available food for rabbits throughout the year, a small ¼ to ½ acre area (depending on the size of the area you have to work with) can be seeded with either red or white clover near the center of the managed habitat zone. To assist in clover growth, lightly cover the newly planted area but do not bury the seed too deeply in the soil. Dragging a small piece of chain-link fence or smaller "chop and drop" tree behind an ATV works well to accomplish this task.

As you can see with just a few simple steps and a couple of hours invested in habitat management, you can create excellent habitat areas for rabbits to flourish. And, as an added bonus, you just might help other game species that require similar habitat conditions, such as quail, turkeys, and other non-game species such as songbirds. So, get out your chainsaw, put on your work gloves and create some "Rabbittat" on your land.

Update to Southwest Missouri Quail Demographics Study

Frank Loncarich, Wildlife Management Biologist, Missouri Department of Conservation

In the Winter 2013 edition of the Covey Headquarters newsletter I introduced the 5-yr comprehensive bobwhite quail ecology and demographics study that the Missouri Department of Conservation was beginning on select conservation areas in southwest Missouri. I wrote that I would provide periodic updates of that research to keep readers up to speed on how things were going. This article serves as an update of 2014 trapping results and early spring findings.

We began our trapping efforts in late February 2014 and finished during the last week of March. Trapping conditions were inconsistent but we were able to capture and radio collar a substantial number of birds. By April 1st the number of birds collared at each site was: Talbot CA – 61, Stony Point Prairie CA – 60, Shawnee Trail CA – 59, and Shelton Prairie – 52. We started tracking birds in earnest in early April, just before covey breakup, with the goal of following the birds through the end of the breeding and brood rearing season (September 30th).

The data we have gathered over the last month was collected during the critical covey breakup and early paring time period. We have noted that some coveys have made significant migrations together before breaking up while other coveys broke up at their winter locations. We have also observed that some individuals have made large moves, some up to 2 miles, from their winter locations to their spring breeding locations. Other birds however, have moved very little from their winter homes. This is consistent with what we saw during our pilot year of data collection, but the long range movement of some birds still surprises me. We have long been taught that quail live their entire life cycle on a 40 acre piece of ground. Our research is showing us that this is not the case.

Another significant, and encouraging, finding is that the observed survival rates of radio collared birds during the covey breakup period have been good. As of the second week of May we have 51 birds alive at Talbot CA, 51 at Stony Point Prairie CA, 51 at Shawnee Trail CA, and 41 at Shelton Prairie CA. The

covey breakup and individual dispersal period is normally a time of high mortality for adult birds as they are more vulnerable to predators because of increased movement. To still have the numbers of birds alive at this point in the study bodes well for the coming breeding season. Of course, we are now entering a time when adult male mortality may increase because of calling behavior. We will keep close tabs on this.

Future plans call for monitoring nest timing, nesting rates, location of nests, and nest success and tracking individual broods. Results of these efforts will hopefully shed some light on why we are seeing such differences in quail density between traditionally managed sites versus grassland dominated sites and inform our knowledge of how to better manage for bobwhite quail on MDC public lands. Over the next 5 years of this study I hope to provide additional updates in this newsletter, especially after we collect and compile critical breeding season data.

Summer Covey Headquarter Calendar

June

Begin spraying actively growing Johnson grass.

Mow newly planted native grass stands to a height of 6-8 inches for weed control.

Mow firebreaks to prepare for late summer and fall burns.

Peak of quail hatching is June 15.

Conduct breeding bird surveys now through June 30.

Seed milo, millet, and forage sorghum food plots before June 30.

<u>July</u>

Spray sericea lespedeza now through September.

Mow newly planted native grass stands a second time to a height of 6-8 inches for weed control.

Excessive June and July rains shifts peak quail hatch to August.

CRP mid-contract management activities can resume July 16th. Contact your FSA office for details.

<u>August</u>

Till firebreaks to prepare for prescribed burns.

Mow or burn fescue to prepare for fall herbicide treatments.

Continue to treat sericea lespedeza through September.

Re-nests and second quail broods hatching – do not mow idle areas.

Be on the look-out for the invasive Sericea lespedeza

Sericea lespedeza is an introduced perennial legume. It has erect, herbaceous to somewhat woody stems, standing 3 to 6 feet (0.8 2 meters) high, with many erect, leafy branches which are green to ashy in color. The compound leaves are composed of three leaflets, with leaflets varying in length from 1/4 to 1 inch (0.8 to 2.5 cm). The lower leaves have petioles, but the upper leaves are nearly sessile. The leaflets are much longer than wide, tapering to the base, and wider above the middle, narrowing abruptly to a small sharp point. Flowers are pale creamy-yellow



with conspicuous purple or pink markings and in clusters of mostly two to three in upper leaf axils.

Habitat - Sericea lespedeza grows in woodlands, thickets, fields, prairies, disturbed open ground, borders of ponds and swamps, meadows, and especially along roadsides. It shows great resistance to summer drought and an ability to form a dense stand on sterile, steep or eroded slopes. Where it has invaded grasslands, sericea lespedeza is unpalatable compared to native species because of tannins present in its tissues.

Life History - Sericea lespedeza produces growth in the spring (mid to late April) from root crown buds at the base of last year's stems. Flowering begins in late July and can continue through October. As flowering progresses, root reserves are increased; a fact that has implications for use of translocated herbicides. Seeds are dispersed in the fall and are reported to remain viable for 20 or more years. Birds may play a role in seed dispersal, and certainly the species is spread by haying of infested fields, especially CRP fields.

Current Status - Since its introduction into Missouri this century, sericea lespedeza has been widely planted and has become naturalized in most if not all Missouri counties. Numerous stands that are well established along roadways will continue to provide a source for spreading into surrounding, more natural habitats. Go to the following site for a two-page, full-color .pdf file that shows how to identify and control sericea lespedeza - http://mdc.mo.gov/sites/default/files/resources/2010/08/9682_6629.pdf. You can also visit http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hp4YT8qU5a4&feature=related for a YouTube video on how to eradicate sericea lespedeza.





United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

The Covey Headquarters Newsletter 3915 Oakland Ave St. Joseph, MO 64506

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

